

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL  
ROBERT ALLARDICE, COMMANDING GENERAL, COALITION AIR FORCE  
TRANSITION TEAM VIA CONFERENCE CALL FROM BAGHDAD, IRAQ TIME: 8:57 A.M.  
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): And who  
just joined us?

Q Hey, Jack. Bruce.

MR. HOLT: Hey, Bruce. Okay. We can probably go ahead and get started  
now. We've got some other folks who have stated that they would be joining us.  
They can join us as they -- as we begin. And let's see here. All right. Okay.

Brigadier General Robert Allardice, who's the commander of the  
Coalition Air Force Transition Team in Baghdad, Iraq, with us this morning for  
the bloggers roundtable. General Allardice, thank you for joining us, and do  
you have an opening statement for us? GEN. ALLARDICE: Good morning. My name  
is Bob Allardice. And as the commander of the Coalition Air Force Transition  
Team -- that's the long way of saying that I have kind of a cool job. My job is  
to help rebuild the Iraqi air force. I command about 325 airmen, 300 of which  
are -- interact with Iraqis on a daily basis, and they -- advise, train and  
counsel is their job.

The Iraqi air force is small by most people's standards, and many of  
you, I know, have engaged before on roundtables, and so you have a general idea  
of the air force. But for those who haven't, let me say this. In 1991, the  
Iraqi air force was the sixth-largest air force in the world. And as a  
consequence of the '91 campaign and the 2003 campaign, we obliterated their air  
force. The Saddam era just wiped it out. There were no aircraft. There was  
virtually no infrastructure -- a few runways with craters in them -- and the  
systems and processes that train and build an air force, which is very complex,  
were completely wiped out and the people were scattered.

So in 2004, they started their effort to rebuild -- (inaudible) -- for  
people, about 35, and I'll talk about where we are today.

And I think somebody may have just joined.

Q It's David Axe.

GEN. ALLARDICE: Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thanks, David.

GEN. ALLARDICE: And the effort to rebuild the Iraqi air force, I would say, began kind of late. In all sincerity, they had a couple of airplanes thrown at them, but in 2005 is really where I would put the marker, where we started getting serious about that. And it wasn't until this year, 2007, where we really ramped up our capability. We went from about a hundred-ish advisers a year ago to over 300 advisers today, and eventually, by next year, we'll peak at about 400 advisers.

The Iraqi air force a year ago had roughly 16 aircraft that were flying. They would fly about 30 sorties a week, and they were relatively benign sorties.

The Iraqi air force today -- oh, and they had about 750 people. The Iraqi air force today has about 1,200 people. They have about 51 aircraft. They are flying 180 sorties a week, and their missions are very impressive. I'll tell you about that here in a minute.

We are very much in the training phase. And we can talk about this in the question-and-answer, but our main focus for the Iraqi air force, from my perspective, is first to organize, train and equip; to build, develop and sustain an air force that is the appropriate air force. And so that's a very complex process, you could imagine, and takes -- (inaudible) -- effort. And at the same time, we're trying to quickly build some capabilities, so that they can impact the counterinsurgency fight.

And so the effort to do -- the training part -- six months ago, that there was no air force academy for the Iraqi air force, there was no technical training school, there was no basic training school for enlisted people, but in the last six months, we've graduated and commissioned second lieutenants in their air force. We've graduated basic airmen that first went to the army basic training and then transitioned to the air force training. And we graduated people from technical training courses, just the very beginning of them -- I don't want to make it sound like it's a whole bunch, but about 78 people total from these courses, which is actually pretty neat. At the same time, we had recruited about 138 pilots from the former air force over the past two to three years, and six months ago the Hueys, Huey II aircraft, started to show up. And we started to qualify them in the Huey II aircraft.

In March -- the Huey II is a helicopter. In March we acquired -- the United States gave the Iraqis a total of three. But when the first one arrived -- a Cessna Caravan, with that -- a -- (brief audio break) -- ISR, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance -- ISR capability that basically can -- kind of like a Predator, a manned Predator, is probably the simple way to say it. And the Cessna Caravan is like a Cessna 172 on steroids.

It's a single-engine airplane but it can carry about six passengers -- kind of a bush kind of airplane, but a real neat capability. That arrived about six months ago, and I'll tell you more about that in a second. And of course, they have the C-130 aircraft that we've provided a couple two years ago. And they have a little single-prop airplane that takes pictures, the SAMA CH2000, which they've had for two years.

Six months ago, I would say, they were having relatively little operational impact. They were just trained to train. Last week was a neat week

for us because last week, the Iraqi air force -- Iraqi C- 130s were engaged in the counterinsurgency fight, delivering humanitarian supplies, medical supplies, to Sulimaniyah to help fight the cholera outbreak. And they had a -- it was both good for them and good for the people up there that the Iraqi air force was able to do that.

At the same time, CH2000 had a -- again they've done this before but they discovered smugglers who had punched holes in the oil pipeline. They identified them, took pictures of them, tracked them and brought -- helped the Iraqi national police bring those people to justice. Basically they led them right to them while they were still airborne, and they have pictures of the arrest.

Next, Iraqi CH2000, which is the -- that ISR platform I was talking about, they were flying over Karbala this last week, watching the march for the birth of the 12th imam, just to see if the crowd would stay under control when the terrible Karbala bombing took place. They were able to take video pictures of this from the air. They can downlink this, live downlink.

But they took the video and provided this to the prime minister so that he would have timely information so when rumors started to fly, he actually was able to put this in the right perspective at the time. At the same time, the Iraqis launched two of their Huey II aircraft, helicopters, to fly down to Karbala for a presence mission and, you know, see how this big crowd -- they're flying back and forth with Iraqi flags. And who knows what the real impact of that is, but I can talk more about what I've experienced flying on Hueys in your -- the question-and-answer.

The important thing about all of these things that I said occurred last week, all four of those incidents, is they were all operated by Iraqis by themselves, manned and controlled by their air ops center, with U.S. -- I'm sorry, with coalition advisers advising them from the ground. But we did not partake in any of those flights. These were operated by Iraqis by themselves, and that was -- they're all small events. But when I looked back on the week collectively, I thought it was a pretty neat thing.

And that describes about where they are today. And you know, my airmen are happy with the progress they've seen. But as you all can imagine, building an air force while you're fighting a counterinsurgency is a complex process but, I think, a very important process when we look at the role of an air force.

So with that as my introductory comments, I'd be glad to take your questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

DJ Elliott, you were first online. Why don't you get us started?

Q Good evening, General. DJ Elliott with the Long War Journal.

I have two questions. One, what do you see the Iraqi air force looking like at the end of 2008? And two, when do you expect to see any jet aircraft join the inventory?

GEN. ALLARDICE: Your first question, the Iraqi air force at the end of 2008 -- our planning has us -- the components of our effort right now focus on the training effort, because that is the baseline for where we want to be.

And when I say training, requalifying pilots that we bring back into the air force now. And requalifying pilots is the most difficult -- or qualifying pilots is the most difficult, but that effort is accelerating. I mentioned earlier they had about a hundred pilots that are flying, 138 pilots total today, but, but within the last two months -- this is remarkable -- within the last two months, they have recruited over 130 pilots that are coming back into the air force that were former air force pilots, just last within the last two months. And this is a pretty big step for us.

So with that in mind, what we see are two things that are pretty exciting. Number one, we start a new pilot training program -- that is, pilot training for brand-new lieutenants -- next month, in the month of October we're going to start that, and so by next December what I see is a full-up pilot training program that's training 130 pilots a year.

In addition, the Iraqi air force from a capability perspective -- I mentioned today they're flying and for the last four weeks they've flown 180 sorties a week. I expect that number to more than triple by this time next year, and I expect by December of '08 that number to be somewhere around 800 sorties per week. I think that somewhere between, oh, 40 to 60 percent of those will be training kind of sorties, and then the rest of them will be operational sorties.

And the operations that I expect by the end of 2008 will include battlefield mobility -- that's moving people around by helicopter on the battlefield, could be distinguished visitors, could be army troops, could be movement to protect the infrastructure. I would expect that we would also have a counterterrorist response capability, which would include the oversight from ISR platforms, pretty sophisticated ISR platforms, with some kinetic capability, kinetic meaning the ability to shoot either a missile or drop a bomb. And then I would also expect that we would continue to increase in our airlift capability. Today we have three C-130s, we have an effort to try to get another three C-130s, and that -- I think I pretty well covered the mission areas.

And then the next question was jet aircraft. That is largely dependent on the Iraqi government. We look at this as my primary mission today is to build an -- help the Iraqis build an air force for the counterinsurgency fight. That we all, I think, understand that for a nation to truly be free, they need to be able to defend their own air sovereignty, and the Iraqis recognize that. And so they look to having a(n) air defense capability -- "defense" -- and so when you say "jet," it's always from a defensive posture -- and they would -- you know, it's kind of a matter of the timing and the resourcing they have available so that they can afford a(n) air defense posture, which is where the jets would come in.

So I would hate to put an exact date on it. I would be absolutely shocked if they did it before 2011. Quite frankly, it's possible, but I doubt it, and I don't see a full (up)capability (?) until beyond 2012.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Grim.

Q Good morning. This is Grim with Blackfive.net. The question just asked was one I had actually intended to ask, so let me ask you about the heavy transport capacity instead. General Cichowski has told us good things

about your aircrews that you've been turning out for the Iraqi air force for your C-130s. Do you envision in the long term a role for the Iraqi air force that would be maybe a contributor in heavy transport operations for NATO- or U.N.-type or coalition operations such as, for example, Norway is doing in Afghanistan?

GEN. ALLARDICE: It probably wouldn't be appropriate for me to speculate on how the Iraqi air force would employ a force externally. I would just offer that with six C-130s, their hands are pretty full right now just engaging inside the borders on their counterinsurgency fight.

So -- I do think that the Iraqis are a very gracious people, a very generous and giving nation, and I think as they become more stabilized, I think that you'll see that generosity emerge. So I really can't speculate to your specific question, but I would offer that they are pretty good people.

Q I just wonder if you're planning a long-term -- or you and they together, I should say -- are planning a long-term heavy transport capacity that might be somewhat more than -- you know, hopefully at some point, the counterinsurgency fight will be won, and then they'll have six C-130s on hand.

GEN. ALLARDICE: I would not characterize the six C-130s that they're going to have on hand as any excess capacity, being that it's honestly tailored -- that's a very modest fleet. And just running the normal logistics and support missions inside this theater -- they'll have their hands full. So I'm not -- I honestly don't know of any plans -- and I just -- (audio break) -- today to talk beyond that.

Q Fair enough. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Bruce McQuain.

Q Hi, General. Bruce McQuain with QandO.net.

We recently talked with General Dubik and General Abadi about their attempts to stand up an NCO corps within the army, and both said that that was really something that was a decade-long deal because, as General Abadi said, essentially there was no NCO corps under the old regime. Is that the -- are you looking at the same sort of problem as far as developing a good NCO corps?

GEN. ALLARDICE: Well, I think that the issue is very interesting. Yes, it's difficult. They -- the Iraqis, in their old structure, did not have an NCO corps. And so we find that we are trying to model the role of the NCO with them and trying to help them build towards that model. It is going to take a very long time, and that -- and so it's just too early to tell.

You know, we're -- what we have done is, we recruited old people, old -- so they're warrant officers -- back into the air force, and that has kind of filled the role of the NCO. But clearly our vision is to build an NCO corps, and we -- it's just not something we can do overnight.

And so I have heard General Dubik and General Abadi talk to this issue and think that we will run a parallel course on the Iraqi air force. Yes.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: David Axe.

Q General, this is David Axe with the Aviation Week Group. Can you update us on the initiative to armed counterinsurgency aircraft for the Iraqi air force?

GEN. ALLARDICE: Yeah. When you say "armed counterinsurgency aircraft," now I think there is a probably a couple of branches to that question. That's -- I would look at a counterinsurgency aircraft as any aircraft that is capable of providing some kind of a kinetic kill from the air. So if it can shoot a rocket or drop a bomb, that's what I would call a -- I think that's what you're talking about when you say "armed counterinsurgency aircraft."

Q Right. Right.

GEN. ALLARDICE: So part of the update is, yeah, the Iraqis have acquired MI-17 aircraft that have the capacity to shoot rockets. And so they have that capability, and they'll be bringing it on line pretty soon. And so that's part of the answer to your question.

The capability from a fixed-wing perspective to deliver a kinetic kill capability, we're in the middle of those discussions right now. I mean, we've explored several options and I can't really tell you that we -- we have not moved forward with a decision. And when I say "we," I mean the collective "we" -- the Iraqis, the commander, General Kamal, and I discussed that as recently as about two hours ago. I can tell you that I don't have a clear, straight answer.

It's our intent to develop a capability, have some kind of kinetic capability by next year and to field some capacity to deliver a light attack aircraft of some sort as soon as we can get that capability, but I wouldn't expect that to occur in 12 months. It will take longer than 12 months. But it kind of depends on which acquisition process we can pursue. We clearly have the intent to develop -- to field, I should say, not develop -- to field a light attack capacity for the Iraqis, or to assist them as they acquire that capability.

Q Could I follow up, actually with an unrelated question? You know, Iraq has a long tradition of fielding a relatively sophisticated air force. Why is it -- it seems to me like it's taken -- strangely, it's taken a long time to stand up -- to re-stand up the Iraqi air force. Why is that?

GEN. ALLARDICE: I'm not supposed to compliment questions, but that's a great question, truly great. I will tell you that, interestingly, I don't think it's taken that long. I think the question might be why did we start so late.

Q Why did we start so late?

(Cross talk.)

GEN. ALLARDICE: It takes a very long time to establish an air force. And General Kamal, the head of the air force, is the only person in the air force that was a general officer in their old air force. And so the mentoring that we are doing with their generals that are in the staff, they were majors and lieutenant colonels in the old air force at various levels and various places. And so it's really interesting that one of the challenges we have is

just helping them understand the complexities of building the air force, first and foremost.

Next, they had great deal of money that they didn't -- in the old air force they had a wonderful air force. It was a capability that they built up after the '67 war. They recognized, well, they're a power, that they couldn't win a war over in this area without having air power, and so they aggressively pursued this capacity after '67. And when they were taken apart in '91 -- or at the end of the Iran conflict, they had almost a thousand aircraft. They were a very robust fleet. But that took a long time to really build up that capacity over, you know, a series of contracts, and that's the thing that we just completely decimated.

And so what we're having to do is to -- first off, they have to be able to apply the resources, have the money, to apply against building up an air force. Next off, they have to have the management capacity to know how to sequence that. Then, they have to have the people in the long pull. It takes two-and-a-half to three years to train a pilot to be able to employ a weapons system, so that capability we have going. And then finally, just acquiring the airplanes.

You know, even in our country, if we acquire an airplane, the acquisition process -- I wish it were just as simple as I have a bag of money and I get to buy an airplane, but I have to follow a fairly lengthy process that can take upwards to 12 to 18 months. And the Iraqis have very similar issues, where when they engage in contact negotiations with a country, we're talking, you know, multi-million, \$50 to \$100 million contracts that they're negotiating, and so it just takes a very long time. And when you piece all that together, it's just a complex process. So that's what it's like.

And let me use a metaphor I use for people to help describe complexities of building up an air force. It may benefit you or your readers. When you go to the airport, next time you go to the airport, as you drive into the airport from the time you hit the parking lot and you punch in the meters and you walk through the front doors and go through security and get your ticket -- swipe your card, whatever you do to get your ticket, and then go through security again and get searched -- and you've dropped your bag off somewhere probably -- and then go out onto the concourse and you get loaded on the airplane, you get on the airplane, take off and land at the next destination and go pick up your bag.

Think of everything that has to go right in that whole process I just described to you, just visualize that. Then, think of all the people, the human beings and the equipment, all the people involved in either direct access or the equipment that had to be maintained to make that whole thing work right so you and your bags could arrive on time. Think of how complex that was and how long it took. Even if you knew in our great country that we have, you were going to build a(n) airport, pick a place today, and you know how to do that, and you have all this capability and all the money to build that airport, think of how long it would take and how difficult it would be to build that single airport.

That's not too far off from what we've had to do here. And so it's just -- that helps, I think, understand (sic) how challenging the problem is.

But we're coming on pretty fast, I think.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Okay. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Did someone else join us?

Q Yes, sir. It's Lieutenant Fishman.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Lieutenant Fishman, go ahead.

Q Thanks for your time, General. Since I'm pretty much the only one from the Air Force, it's good to finally hear someone else from the Air Force here.

If you could maybe just talk a little bit to the actual personnel makeup that we know -- it used to be pretty much the higher class of Sunni used to be in the air force. And as you said, now, with the de- Ba'athification, re- Ba'athification, some are being added back into the air force. So could you talk to kind of how the rest of society views that and how the army views that and the other security forces all view kind of the makeup of the air force and the type of esprit de corps of the air force?

GEN. ALLARDICE: What I -- I can't talk to how the army views the air force because I interact with the air force, not the army. I can tell you my impression of the air force from the perspective, I think, that you've just staked out.

First off, I learn every day in this job, and I thought I'd studied a lot coming into the job, but I still learn every day. And I've found that over my time here that any -- that the concept of sectarianism is a little bit oversimplified from the Western perspective, particularly when it comes to the air force. It's just -- there's just not a sectarian breakout. If there's any breakout, it's army versus air force.

Q (Chuckles.) GEN. ALLARDICE: They truly -- and I say that smiling, but they truly look at themselves as airmen. And I'm thinking, in my mind -- they're very secular. The air force is very secular. And in my mind, I know multiple Sunni, Shi'a, Kurds, and I only know it because I may have asked somewhere, "What is this person? How is that person?" as I tried to, in my own naivete, put together a mosaic of the different -- what I perceived it -- when I first showed up, was the different sectarian influences.

And what I learned is that in the air force -- I won't say it doesn't exist, because I just -- that doesn't make sense to me to say it doesn't exist. But I have not seen evidence in any way of a sectarian split.

And I've also not seen the evidence in today's air force of the hierarchy that you've alluded to. Again, I -- remember that these people today were not generals in the old air force.

These people today were the majors and lieutenant colonels in the air force with, you know, General Kamal being the exception to the upper generals and to the existing generals from the old air force. And so I find that we -- when we ask the question and I watch my people ask the question about, "Well, does this make a difference if you're Sunni or Shi'a" -- that it's almost -- either the reaction is a perplexed reaction -- why would you ask that question?

-- or sort of a nonchalant response to the question and they say, well, no, I -- you know, it makes no difference to me if that person is Sunni or Shi'a.

In fact, what I often hear is the -- you know, I am a Shi'a but my wife is Sunni, or I am a Sunni and my wife is a Shi'a-Kurd, and so it's a -- this is a long answer; I'll tell you, it's a very secular organization. And from the cadets at the English-language training and the commissioning sources at the interim academy, all the way up to the senior officers, that's the response I get.

Now let's talk to your question about morale. I think morale comes and goes, like it would in almost any organization. And there are times when in my -- I've been here since March, and there are times where I thought I detected discouragement, and then there are times I thought I detected encouragement. And let me say this, I'm not the expert on how surges are working or not working. Let me just state a couple of facts to you all.

Number one, my vice is a lot easier in the last four weeks because I'm not getting shelled every day. I just point that out as a statement of fact. It's kind of nice.

Number two, two months ago, I didn't have -- we didn't have anybody coming into the Iraqi air force. Despite the efforts to recruit, I was told for my first three months, it's just very difficult to get anybody. And starting about mid-July until today, we wound up with the numbers I gave you earlier on -- you know, over 130 pilots that are now coming back into the air force. Actually, I have a longer list -- people want to come back in -- those are the people that I have on my list that they cleared the initial screening process, and now we're trying to, you know, finish the paperwork on them.

So I marvel at that. I just think -- you know, I ask myself, what changed? And the only thing I can think of is that there is a degree of -- a sense on the streets of, hmm, something's a little bit different today. I'm not asserting that that's causal; I just -- it's there. And then the other thing is -- more that I can talk to is that the morale of the air force has picked up as they have gotten involved in real operations, as they have begun to have an influence on -- you know, about six weeks ago, they stopped a pirating operation down in southern Iraq, and the pilots got rewarded from the minister of Oil for stopping that. The helicopter pilots -- we thought at the beginning of July that maybe by December, they would be able to perform (a(n) enforced ?) reconnaissance of the pipeline and the electrical lines and provide feedback to the authorities.

And they started doing that in July, at the end of July, not just they started doing it but they started doing it in conjunction with the Cessna Caravan that was flying an overwatch. And that was a complexity of mission that, while would think it was kind of simple, I just didn't think they would be able to do it until the end of the year. And yet they started to perform that in July.

And so the only thing I can think is that as they started to execute those missions, people started to get excited, and the morale improved, and people started -- more people started to join. Now, do they have challenges? Yeah, absolutely, and on any given day or month, they -- their morale will likely meet some of those challenges. But right now, the -- it's on a significant uptick, and I'm pretty excited about that.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Any follow-up questions? Just a few minutes left.

All right, Brigadier General Robert Allardice, commander of the Coalition Air Force Transition Team, Baghdad, Iraq, sir, do you have any closing comments for us?

GEN. ALLARDICE: Yeah, I would like to say that one of the things that we often miss out on is the -- just the real joy from the people who do this kind of business. You know, when you or when I have the opportunity to go out in the field and talk to my airmen and ask them, how's it going or, you know, how they're going, I just described the morale of the Iraqi air force. But what's important to me obviously is the morale of my largely United States air force out in the field.

And I wish I could accurately communicate to you the energy and the pride that these airmen have, both in their own efforts and in the efforts of the Iraqis. If I ever get discouraged about the challenges that I think I face consulting with the commander of the Iraqi air force, all I need to do is go out in the field and talk to a tech sergeant or a master sergeant or a pilot captain, who has just spent the day working with their Iraqi and seeing their Iraqi, come alive and talk about how much he likes the job and how excited he is to be engaged in this. It is truly encouraging.

And the last thing I'll tell you is you wonder, what impact does it have just flying a few Hueys here or there or whatever? And this is what I tell people. I fly all over the country in my job on -- normally on Black Hawks. We have Air Force bases way up in the north, we have them way down in the south and in the middle, and so I get a chance to get around. And when I fly on a Black Hawk, you know, I will go over people in Baghdad and I hardly even get a look. But when I'm on a Huey and that Huey flies over people and they see the Iraqi flag, it will send chills down your spine to see how many people get this huge smile on their face and start jumping up and down and waving at the helicopter.

And when I asked one of the Iraqi helicopter pilots, is it important for him to fly, he actually got a tear in his eye when he said -- described the scene I just gave you and said, "It's so important for our people to see our flag flying around the country."

And so those two general stories right there are the thing that encourage me and makes it exciting to be a part of this job.

Thanks a lot for your time today. I really appreciate what you- all are doing for us. God bless America.

Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. And hopefully, we can speak again in a few weeks, get another update from you. Brigadier General Robert Allardice, the commander of the coalition Air Force Transition Team from Baghdad, Iraq. Thank you very much for being with us today, sir.

GEN. ALLARDICE: All right. Thank you all. 'Bye.

MR. HOLT: Bye-bye.

END.